



RESEARCH ARTICLE

WASHBACK EFFECT OF YEMENI GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOL CERTIFICATE ENGLISH EXAMINATION ON TEACHERS' TEACHING PRACTICES AND CLASSROOM TESTING

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Abstract

The new trends in language testing towards the effect of testing in language learning and teaching helped in emerging a new concept "washback" or "backwash" to reflect the vital role that tests play, positively or negatively, in language learning and teaching. This study aims to investigate the washback effect of Yemeni General Secondary School Certificate English Examination (YGSSCEE) on teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing. The research methodology was quantitative approach design. Interview was used as a research instrument. The population of this study was 21 of English language teachers at Yemeni secondary schools namely: Aden, Abyan and Lahj. The study used purposive sampling method. The findings of the study revealed that teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing were, negatively, influenced by YGSSCEE. Most of the teachers used grammar translation method instead of implementation of communicative language teaching that was emphasized by Crescent English Course 6 for Yemen (CEC6Ym). Most of the teachers adapted the classroom tests from the past YGSSCEE papers. Reading, writing and grammar were given more emphasis; while listening skill was totally skipped in language teaching and testing. Most of the teachers considered the YGSSCEE as a role model in language teaching and testing in classrooms.

Keywords: Washback, Teachers' practices, Classroom testing, General secondary school certificate english examination.

Introduction

Testing plays an important role in the field of teaching and learning language. It is the dynamic step to provide information on teachers and students. The educational phenomenon that describes the effect of testing on teaching and learning is referred to as washback or backwash. The former has been widely used in applied linguistics whilst the latter in general education. Flinders cited in Andrew (2010) stated, " what is tested now determines what is taught" (p.50). That is, "the washback of the exam narrowed the curriculum in that the teaching practice was geared to those areas of the lessons expected to test" (Gashaye, 2012, p.29).

Besides, the classroom testing may be affected positively or negatively by washback of external exam (Alderson and Wall 1993). That means, when the classroom test is designed in the way that promotes the implementation of the syllabus in which the pupils are assessed in line with the contents and objectives of the syllabus. That means, the national exam produces a positive washback. On the other hand, when the teachers

adapt the classroom tests from the previous exam papers with in the intension of preparing pupils to succeed in the national exam. That is, the exam produces negative washback (Alderson and Wall 1993).

Moreover, the YGSSCEE may drive teachers and pupils to focus on some aspects of language such as grammar and neglecting the aural aspect of the English language (i.e. listening skill) since this language skill was neglected in designing the YGSSCEE. In such case, one can explicitly deduce that the exam affects negatively the perception of teachers and pupils about the main goal of English language teaching and learning. The present study is an attempt to shed light on the washback effect of the YGSSCEE on the teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing.

Statement of the problem

Many scholars agreed on that the high-stake exam (standardized test) affects language teaching, learning and testing. In other words, it assesses how the teaching and testing techniques that are used by teachers in classrooms are affected by it. Crescent English Course 6 for Yemen (CEC6Ym) pioneered the communicative approach to language learning and teaching (CEC6Ym, p.4). Additionally, the course emphasizes the integration of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing in the way that develop pupils' communication skills. Consequently, communicative language testing should be considered in order to develop pupils' communicative competence (the ability to use the knowledge in a meaningful communicative situation). As a result, teachers are expected to adapt communicative language teaching method and communicative testing approach that focus on developing pupils' language skills. However, there is convincing evidence to suggest that the high-stakes tests (standardized tests) have powerful washback effect on teaching, learning and classroom testing positively or negatively (Hoque, 2011, Onaiba, 2013 and Bunti 2014). Accordingly, the researcher thought it significant to investigate this issue and find out the extent to which YGSSCEE has an effect on teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing. In addition, the study is a first attempt with the Yemeni (Aden) context that focuses on the effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing, findings from this study will draw the attention of the school administrations and teachers in particular and Yemeni educational administrations in general.

Objectives of the study

The study aimed to:

1. To investigate the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices.
2. To investigate the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' classroom testing.

Research Questions

In the present study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices?
2. What is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' classroom testing?

Significance of the study

The study is the first attempt made within the context of the Departments of English at Faculties of University of Aden focusing on the washback effect of YGSSCEE on English language teaching and classroom testing. Therefore, the study may make a significant contribution to the field of testing and washback at the level of secondary schools. In addition, the study may draw the attention of the school administrations in particular and the Yemeni educational administrations in general focusing on this issue.

Scope and Limitation of the study

This study is limited to 21 English language teachers of CEC6Ym at seven secondary schools distributed in three provinces: Aden, Lahj and Abyan. 3 teachers from each secondary school was selected.

Research Methodology

Context of the study

The context of the study was the secondary schools in three provinces: Aden, Lahj and Abyan. CEC6Ym is the prescribed coursebook for the third class of the secondary schools. Both the coursebook and the workbook contain a lot of communicative tasks, activities and exercises. That is, it pioneered the communicative approach to language learning and teaching. " The Crescent English Course, specially developed for teaching of English in Arab schools. The course has a combined functional and structural syllabus. CEC6Ym contains six units, an Arts Reader and a Science Reader. The core material is intended to be used by all pupils for developing language skills" (CEC6Ym, p.4). On this account, the content of the course is organized into units of grammatical basis in which the topics cover different notions and functions. In addition, the course emphasizes the integration of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Consequently, it presents different types of activities and tasks for pair and group work that aimed to develop pupils' communicative skills.

As mentioned earlier, CES6Ym is based on the communicative approach in English language learning and teaching. Accordingly, testing can then take place on both the pupils' knowledge of grammar and their ability to make use of it (CEC6Ym, p. 6). That is, communicative language testing approach should be considered in designing teacher-made achievement tests to develop pupils' communicative competence. This type of testing is used to measure the language abilities of the pupils to use the target language in authentic situations. Consequently, different tasks that should be carried out in authentic situation as it is used in real life, is the main aim of the communicative approach. Weir (2005) mentioned two main concepts in communicative testing: competence and performance. In this approach, the pupil should not only know the form of the language but also she/he should be able to demonstrate this knowledge in a meaningful communicative situation (performance) (pp.26-27). To conclude, CEC6Ym pioneered the communicative approach to English language teaching and testing; accordingly, teachers' teaching practices and testing should reflect the implementation of this approach in classroom.

Participants and Sampling

An explicit research design paves the way for carrying out the study and informs the researcher where to go, what to do and how to get there. The research methodology of the present study was quantitative approach design. The 21 participants involved in this study are the English secondary school teachers at three provinces: Aden, Lahj and Abyan. The teachers were interviewed to explore the washback effect of the YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing. Most of those were interviewed over the phone and some others were interviewed in person. The present study used a purposive sampling method meaning that it involves selection of participants based on an important characteristic. In this case, all the participants were English foreign language teachers who had received BA degree in English and they had taught CEC6Ym. Pseudonyms were used. The table (1) below shows teachers' details.

Table (1):

Participants' Numbers	Teaching context	Teachers
3	Aban secondary school for girls (Aden)	SM, AM & SA
3	Lotfi Aman secondary school for boys (Aden)	YS, MU & AL
3	Bilqees secondary school for girls (Abyan)	SU, WI & SHA
3	Khawla secondary school for girls (Abyan)	MA, FA & GA
3	Abubaker Alsdeeq secondary school for boys (Abyan)	MA, SA & YA
3	Alzahra secondary school for girls (Lahj)	AI, FA & AS
3	Alfarooq secondary school for boys (Lahj)	MA, AL & IB

Data collection and Analysis

For the present study, interview was used as data collection procedure for collecting data as an oral question-answer session between the researcher and respondent. Interview is considered as " qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a smaller number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation" Boyce and Neale (2006, p. 3). In addition, there are three types of interview:

- 1) Structured interview in which the researcher has questions at hand to ask.
- 2) Semi-structured interview in which the researcher has questions at hand and gives the interviewee a freedom to follow up.
- 3) Unstructured interview in which the researcher has no questions at hand and gives the interviewee much freedom to talk.

In the case of this study, structured interview was conducted to make analyzing, coding and comparing of data easier. Accordingly, the obtained data were, firstly, transcribed and then coded, categories and subcategories were established to be labelled by descriptive words. Finally, they were grouped as themes. The six interview's questions lasted between 10-15 minutes.

Literature Review

Washback on Teachers' Practices

Many scholars have agreed on the contribution of test to English language teaching and learning. This educational phenomenon is known as *washback* or *backwash* that is defined as " a part of importance a test may have on learners and teachers on educational system in general, and on society at large" (Hughes, 2003, p. 53). With the same vein, Harrison (1983) argued that testing and teaching are closely interrelated. For him, testing can be considered not only teaching practices in classroom but also mechanism that helps teachers to recognize to what extent the used teaching methods are appropriate ones (p.1).

Moreover, Alderson Hamp-Lyons (1996) contended that there is a large difference in the way teachers teach towards the same exam or exam skill "teaching to the test". They added that some teachers are textbook slave, approaches, while others adopted more creative and independent approaches (p.292). In addition, Cheng (2005) undertook washback study to investigate the influence of a newly revised public examination on aspects of teaching and learning. The finding of her study revealed that washback effects of the examination on teaching were limited. She commented, " the way the teachers carried out their teaching remained more or less the same, whether the testing syllabus was the old one or the new one" (p.246). Nevertheless, Amengual-Pizarro (2009) emphasized that there was relationship between teachers' teaching methods and tests when he stated it clearly, " contrary to previous studies that found no straight forward connection between the test and teachers' methodology, teachers employ in actual class teaching adapting to the purpose of the tests" (p.594).

Similarly, Jamila and Kabir (2020) stated it simply, "it is evident that teaching to the test exists at the secondary school certificate (SSC) level" (p. 569).

All in all, this study attempted to confirm the existence of this phenomenon (washback) on teachers' practices in classrooms namely in high-stake tests (standardized test, YSSCEE) focusing on Alderson and Wall washback hypothesis (1993) that claims, "a test will influence teaching, a test will influence what teachers teach and a test will influence how teachers teach" (pp.120-121). Consequently, in the case of this study, the term washback is used to refer to the effect of GSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing.

Washback on Teachers' Classroom Testing

The new trends in language testing towards the effect of testing in language learning and teaching helped in the appearance of a new concept "*washback*" or "*backwash*" which are now interchangeably used in both English for foreign language (EFL) and English for specific purpose (ESL) researches. In the case of this study, the term washback, also, is used to refer to the effect of GSSCEE on teachers' classroom testing.

Teaching, learning and testing are three main aspects of educational process. Teachers teach for learning students. Then teachers test the students for getting effective learning and teaching. The obtained results of tests may give teachers a good feedback on the effectiveness of the used teaching methods/ techniques, teaching materials and testing techniques in classroom. In addition, different studies asserted that the effect of the national exam on the classroom testing. For example, Bunti (2014) contended that teachers' classroom testing techniques are influenced by the tested skills and items that frequently appeared in the national exam. He added that teachers in designing classroom tests try to familiarize and prepare students for the national exam (p. 15). In agreement for this, Hoque (2011) emphasized that the national exam affects both teachers and students. He stated, "it is found that the majority of the teachers tended to "teach to the test. It is found more test-related activities in the exam preparation classes" (p. 372).

Regarding the effect of teaching experience of teacher on classroom testing, Shohamy et al. (1996) cited in Onaiba (2013) pointed out that the experienced teachers were more perceptive and thoughtful to the national exam and thus they use it as a source of guidance for teaching and testing in classroom (p.73). In addition, Onaiba (2013) conducted a study on the washback effect of a revised EFL public examination on teachers' instructional practices, materials and curriculum. The finding of his study revealed that the exam has an effect on teachers' classroom behavior, teaching and testing practices" (p.267). From Onaiba's words, one can deduce that the high-stake test (YSSCEE) can be considered as a guide for teachers in classroom testing and teaching.

Discussion of the Results

This part presents and discusses the results of the data analysis for each of the research questions that were answered by conducting structured interview. The results were presented according to the order of the study's questions respectively:

Washback Effect of YGSSCEE on Teachers' Practices

Research Question 1

1. What is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices?

For answering the research question above, the researcher asked the participants of the study three questions as follows:

1. Do you think YGSSCEE has an effect on your teaching practice in classroom? If yes, how?
2. To which language skill (s) do you give more emphasis in your teaching? Why?
3. Do you think YGSSCEE should be your role model in English language teaching? Why?

When the teachers were asked *do you think YGSSCEE has an effect on your teaching practice in classroom?*, their responses indicated that most of the teachers (20 out of the total number 21) think that YGSSCEE had an effect on their teaching practices in classrooms. In addition, when the teachers were asked how YGSSCEE affects their teaching practices, their responses indicated that the grammar translation teaching method was implemented in classrooms rather than the implementation of communicative language teaching method (communicative approach) that ECC6Ym was based on. For instance, one of the teachers explained, " *I try to focus on the important grammatical rules that pupils will need for answering the questions of the examination*". From teachers' words, one can deduce that they try to transmit the important information and knowledge that pupils need to pass YGSSCEE. Wang (2000) clarified that the teacher's role in conducting grammar translation method, is as a transmitter of knowledge, a controller of activities and knowledge authority (p.20). Another teacher, additionally, legitimated that " *a large proportion of the exam questions focused on grammar and vocabulary, accordingly, we focus on the grammatical rules and the new words of each lesson in the coursebook to help pupils pass the exam* ". Brown (2000) pointed out that the grammar translation method focuses on grammar rules and memorization of vocabulary (p.15).

Regarding the second question, *to which language skill (s) do you give more emphasis*, teachers' responses fall into two categories: 1) grammar and reading (10 teachers) and 2) grammar, reading and writing (11 teachers). This finding reflected the effect of implementation of grammar translation method on language skills teaching. Wang (2000) asserted that language skills that are emphasized by implementing grammar translation method are: grammar, reading and writing while listening skill is neglected (p. 20). However, CEC6Ym pioneered the communicative approach in which the integration of the language skills and ability (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar) are emphasized. Attamimi in his study (2003) presented seven reasons behind the use of the grammar translation method in Yemen (p. 3) as follows:

- The textbooks being used follow the principles of this approach.
- Lack of adequate training in language teaching methodology.
- Old teachers are taught by this approach and are still affected by it.
- Demand of grammatical accuracy by directors of education.
- Its suitability to execute lessons in a short time.
- Its suitability to large classes.
- It does not need great efforts in teaching.

Overall, this finding was supported by Puspitasari's study (2020), when she asserted, " the high stakes that accompany external testing have created a situation where teachers feel forced to improve their students' performance as demonstrated by gaining high scores in the exam rather than seeking to enhance student learning in relation to all that matters in the curriculum" (p.31).

Regarding the third question, *do you think YGSSCEE should be your role model in English language teaching? If yes, Why?*, the teachers' responses fall into two categories: 1) YGSSCEE is considered as a role model in teaching (15 teachers) and 2) YGSSCEE is considered as an aid factor in teaching (6 teachers). It is clear from the teachers' responses that most of them (15 teachers) considered YGSSCEE as a model they should follow to help their pupils pass the exam successfully. This finding was supported by Billah (2015) when he asserted that the ultimate goal of learning English is to prepare and manage marks in the national exam (p.13). On the other hand, 6 teachers out of the total number 21, considered YGSSCEE as an aid factor that helped them focusing on the important aspects of YGSSCEE; additionally, they try to put their own mark in teaching. For instance, one teacher explained, " *not only do we benefit from the style of YGSSCEE, but also to put our own marks in teaching since it is an aid factor*".

Wasback Effect of YGSSCEE on Teachers' classroom Testing

Research Question 2

1. What is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' classroom testing?

For answering the research question above, the researcher asked the participants of the study three questions as follows:

1. Do you think YGSSCEE has an effect on your classroom testing? If yes, how?
2. To which language skill (s) do you give more emphasis in your classroom testing? Why?
3. Do you think YGSSCEE should be your role model in classroom testing? Why?

The fourth question, above, demonstrate that the majority of the teachers (18 out of 21 teachers) think that YGSSCEE had an effect on their classroom testing. When the teachers were asked how YGSSCEE affects their classroom testing, their responses indicated that most of the teachers adapted the classroom tests from past YGSSCEE papers in order to familiarize and prepare pupils for the exam. As a result, the teachers used, to great extent, the YGSSCEE testing techniques. For instance, one of the teachers explained, "*I used the same testing techniques of YGSSCEE to help my pupils to be familiar and to understand the exam questions; accordingly they can answer the YGSSCEE questions successfully*". Whilst another teacher pointed out that, "*the educational administration asked us to design the classroom tests to be, to great extent, the same with the YGSSEE style*". Simachew (2012) cited in Bunti (2014) pointed out that when teachers adapt classroom tests from national exam papers, that means it failed to produce a positive impact (p.14).

When the teachers were asked to answer *to which language skill (s) do you give more emphasis in your classroom testing? Why?*. All the teachers' responses indicated largely that: reading, writing and grammar were emphasized in classroom tests. Regarding the reasons behind this, one of them, for instance, legitimate, "*the YGSSCEE emphasized reading, writing and grammar while listening was neglected*". Dereje (2000) cited in Bunti (2014) asserted that secondary school teachers emphasized the tested skills and items that frequently appeared in the national exam (p.15). All in all, this finding revealed the washback effect of YGSSEE on teachers' classroom testing.

Regarding the last question, *do you think YGSSCEE should be your role model in classroom testing? Why?*, the teachers responses fall into two categories: 1) YGSSCEE is considered as a role model in classroom testing (18 teachers) and 2) YGSSCEE is considered as an aid factor in classroom testing (3 teachers). It is clear from the teachers' responses above that most of the teachers (18 teachers) considered the YGSSCEE as a model that they should follow to help the pupils pass the exam successfully. While one of the teachers, for instant, explained, "*70% of the questions of the classroom test, that I design, were similar to the YGSSCEE questions. While 30% of the questions were based on my own style*". From the teacher words, one can deduce that the YGSSCEE is considered as an aid factor that familiarize the pupils to the YGSSCEE; additionally, they use their own questions style.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the study will be presented sequentially according to research questions. The first research was *what is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' teaching practices?*. The results obtained from secondary school teachers' interview revealed that the teaching methods of the English language at Yemeni secondary schools were negatively influenced by YGSSCEE. Most of the teachers (20 teachers of the total number 21) used grammar translation method in grammar and language skills teaching. They did not implement communicative language teaching in which the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar were emphasized by CEC6Ym (communicative approach). Moreover, the results obtained from teachers' interview revealed that 10 teachers gave more emphasis towards grammar and reading and 11 teachers

gave more emphasis towards grammar, reading and writing during English language teaching process. While listening skill is totally skipped. In addition, the results obtained from teachers' interview revealed that most of the teachers (15 out of 21) considered the YGSSCEE as a role model in English language teaching in classrooms. While the others (6 teachers) considered YGSSCEE as an aid factor.

Regarding the second research question *what is the washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' classroom testing*, the results obtained from teachers' interview revealed that the majority of the teachers (18 out of 21) think that YGSSCEE has an effect on teachers' classroom testing when they adapted the classroom tests from past YGSSCEE papers. In addition, the results obtained from teachers' interview revealed that all the teachers gave more emphasis towards grammar, reading and writing in designing classroom tests; while listening skill is totally skipped. Moreover, the results obtained from teachers' interview revealed that most of the teachers (18 out of 21) considered the YGSSCEE as an aid factor to familiarize and prepare pupils to the YGSSCEE; additionally, they use their own style.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. It is recommended that teachers should implement communicative language teaching method to achieve the objectives of the CEC6Ym, consequently, improving pupils' language proficiency and preparing them for YGSSCEE.
2. It is recommended that teachers give more emphasis toward developing pupils' language skills: listening, reading, writing and grammar and then prepare pupils for YGSSCEE.
3. It is recommended that teachers should not only take YGSSCEE as a role model to guide them in English language teaching and testing in classrooms but also they should consider the teaching approach and the language skills to be emphasized more.
4. It is recommended that the educational school administration should make frequent supervisions to evaluate teachers' teaching practices and classroom testing to know the extent to what teachers achieve the objectives and the contents of the CEC6Ym.

Suggestions for further studies

1. The washback effect of YGSSCEE on pupils' performances in classrooms.
2. The washback effect of YGSSCEE on teachers' implementation of communicative language teaching in classrooms (communicative approach).

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مقالة بحثية

الأثر الرجعي لامتحان شهادة الثانوية العامة اليمنية لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية على ممارسات التدريس وأساليب التقويم الصفية للمعلمين

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المُلخَص

تؤكد الأبحاث في مجال دراسة الأثر الرجعي لأساليب التقويم، الدور الحيوي والفاعل الذي تؤديه أساليب التقويم وأثرها الرجعي في العملية التعليمية والتعلمية إيجاباً وسلباً. تهدف هذه الدراسة لتحري الأثر الرجعي لامتحان شهادة الثانوية العامة اليمنية على ممارسات التدريس وأساليب التقويم الصفية للمعلمين. ركزت الدراسة على استعمال المنهج الكمي في جمع البيانات. استعملت المقابلة كأداة جمع البيانات. كانت عينه الدراسة غرضية (21 معلم) من ثلاث محافظات: عدن وإبين ولحج. توصلت الدراسة الى النتائج التالية:

1. تتأثر ممارسات التدريس للمعلمين سلباً بالأثر الرجعي لامتحان شهادة الثانوية لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية.
2. الأغلبية من المعلمين يستخدم الطريقة التقليدية (طريقة الترجمة القواعدية) كأسلوب تدريس بدل من استخدام الطريقة التواصلية.
3. الأغلبية من المعلمين يعتمد على نماذج الأسئلة للامتحانات السابقة في إعداد الاختبارات الصفية للطلاب.
4. يعطي المعلمين تركيز أكبر على مهارة القراءة والكتابة وقواعد اللغة بينما مهارة الاستماع مهملة تماماً.
5. يعتبر الأغلبية من المعلمين امتحان الثانوية العامة لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية انموذج يحتذى به في ممارسات التدريس المستخدمة وأساليب التقويم الصفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأثر الرجعي، ممارسات التدريس للمعلمين، أساليب التقويم الصفية، امتحان شهادة الثانوية العامة لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية.

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